David Andrews, Veletta Canouts, and S. Terry Childs

Forging a Presence on the World Wide Web

Rule #1: A Website is better than a publication.
Rule #2: A Website is not a publication.
Rule #3: There are no rules.

This is the reality that the NPS cultural resources center confronted after hastily assembling a Web team earlier this year. We faced a medium still in its infancy, much like television in 1946. Unlike other modes of communication, there were, and are, few guidelines on how to use it effectively. Nevertheless, we had our orders, straight from Director Kennedy himself: Mobilize the medium, now.

One thing we knew: This wasn't print. Gone was linearity, since a site can link to one or a hundred other sites, not to mention cross-linking to areas within itself. A trifold brochure presents information in sequence, with panels opened and read as the design dictates. With the Web, viewers choose the order-or exit altogether, going from a petroglyph site at Chaco Canyon, say, to France's newly discovered cave art with the quick click of a mouse. Out the door too are regular schedules and editions, since information can be updated at will.

And though the Web isn't TV, visuals rule, sound bites speak volumes, chat groups are "live," and the audience is large enough to light up an Arbitron box-literally millions for a cost less than printing a four-color brochure. These are the numbers enticing the Park Service and thousands of other organizations worldwide onto the Web.

The National Park Service's first attempt to provide World Wide Web access to cultural resources servicewide is the "Links to the Past" home page. This project is a multidisciplinary collaborative effort.

Our biggest challenge wasn't technical (aside from the daunting deadlines we faced to get things up and running). The primary Web language, hypertext mark-up language or HTML, is a lot like the formatting codes typesetters used before desktop publishing came along; even without conversion software, HTML isn't difficult to master. What we had instead was a medium that refused to fit our organizational paradigm.

Our Web customers-the general public-would have little use for a program-by-program presentation of mission statements. Clearly, the public's interest crosscut our organizational boxes; archeology, for example, resides in several different offices. The audience would want to access a topic in a quick and simple way, the electronic equivalent of one-stop shopping.

But who was the general public? The mostly upper-income subscribers of Web browser services? What about kids? And what about our professional colleagues in other organizations-were they a subset of "general public"?

To complicate matters, no one was completely sure how to employ the new tool. Some wanted to use the Website for public relations. Others saw it as an education medium. Still others wanted to use it to market publications. In truth, few understood it and fewer still had the browser access necessary to understand the Web's multiple voices.

This made inspiring teamwork difficult-which was our job-especially among groups that hadn't worked together before. Cooperation was vital to putting our best face forward to the public.

At first, the Web team got hung up on technical issues like mastering HTML and debating an office-by-office approach vs. posting answers to the most frequent public inquiries. The team coalesced soon after we crafted a concept and story board, put together thanks to our experience in electronic and desktop publishing (the National Archeological Database, *Federal Archeology*). It was precisely because of this experience-which put us ahead on the learning curve-that our program chief encouraged our involvement in the team effort.

The presentation of the concept sparked a brainstorm. Why not offer customers easy access to information on all the fascinating resources we manage? Nationally significant lighthouses, Civil War battlefields, museum collections, sunken steamboats-these things, coupled with information on preserving them-would grab and hold viewer attention. The discourse shifted to a resource-based approach, which was ultimately adopted. Essential to implementing the concept was an understanding of the breadth of our programs and what they have to offer, as well as a grasp of how to navigate browsers to it.

Since time was of the essence, we focused on loading almost ready resources into the site. The curation program digitized 100 high-resolution photos of premier artifacts; the Geographic Information System (GIS) lab had maps of many Civil War battlefields; our program could link the site to the National Archeological Database.

There was and still is controversy over what constitutes effective communication on the Web. Some people in the center scanned in thick reports, while others limited what they loaded to bite-size bits. The trick, it seems, is to place longer documents (like legislation) in the deeper layers, for ambitious browsers who really want to dig into a topic. Long copy on top, we think, has to be absolutely riveting for the audience. Otherwise, click and they're gone.

In our program, we're adopting the less-is-more approach as we flesh out the archeology and ethnography segment of the site. We're being careful not to overload the screen, especially the upper layers, which we believe encourages site surfers to stick around.

So, does a Website best a publication? It depends on your audience and your communications goals. Print is more expensive, but boasts portability, sharp focus, and-in the hands of a good writer and designer-a better ability to communicate the message. You control exactly what goes in, who gets the information, and how they look at it. These are crucial elements in, say, a fund-raising piece for a museum.

A Website can reach millions at a minimal cost, but only those with the right software, and you lose some control over the material. Right now the Web severely constrains design, layout, and typography, so it makes sense to professionally design only the most important, uppermost layers of a site. Then there is the problem of getting your message heard amidst the clatter of thousands of other sites springing up. Just letting people know you're online is a challenge itself.

The promise of the Web, however, is enormous. Some experts expect that the sophisticated capabilities of CD-ROM will ultimately migrate over. Several corporations, notably Adobe and Netscape, are collaborating on a formatting program for Web pages, and Quark plans to market Orion (TM), a tool for converting layout files for Web use. Even now, a Website boasts the ability to broadcast an almost unlimited amount of information.

In the National Park Service, it doesn't take much to see the potential of this tool for an organization that is itself a nationwide network. Now that the deadline heat is off, we have the time and management support to tailor the medium to our needs. A Cultural Resources Web team was set up with co-team leaders. Within our own program, we've kept our initial Web group standing to build on the expertise gained so far. That way, we'll be better equipped to deal with the core questions facing site developers.

So is a Website a tool for public relations, for marketing, or for education? Probably all of the above, and more. As our program works to spin off an electronic version of our quarterly, *Federal Archeology,* aimed at non-professionals, we realize we can achieve both education and public relations goals. Meantime, we acknowledge that we must improve access for our professional colleagues as well (a whole other audience perhaps deserving its own Website). Our challenge is to come up with a structure that prompts viewers to explore all the byways we provide, without losing quick access to more traditional offerings like publications lists.

But then again, maybe we should publish some things exclusively on the Web and forget about printing them altogether. Or maybe we should compile more of our information as databases, which are better suited to electronic media than print. This sort of ongoing self-evaluation is taking place at many government agencies as they forge their online presence.

In the NPS cultural resources center, the World Wide Web is doing nothing less than making us rethink how we program the work we do. It's a medium to be reckoned with.

David Andrews is Managing Editor and Designer of Federal Archeology, published by the Archeology and Ethnography program.

Veletta Canouts is Deputy Chief of the NPS Archeology and Ethnography Program, located in the National Center for Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnerships in Washington, DC. She is also Program Leader for the National Archeological Database.

S. Terry Childs is Program Leader for Federal Archeological Collections, Records, and Reports (and NADB-Reports).